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ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes planning at Red River College in Manitoba. The paper suggests that the decision-making process be effectively linked with analytics. The fundamental role of institutional research and planning in postsecondary education is to provide the analytic and planning inputs that can facilitate decision-making. It is necessary to gather, organize, and distribute knowledge about the social, economic, technological, and political variables having an impact on postsecondary institutions. The key factors for success at Red River College were: (1) the process was highly structured and organized with a communicated and approved, detailed project management plan including objectives, activities, identified participants, and milestones over four months; (2) there was confidence in the research results; (3) the process recognized the essential collegial nature of a postsecondary educational institution and engaged administrative and academic leaders; and (4) the process was completed on time and in a relatively brief period of time. Successful management of postsecondary institutions utilizes the ability of senior leaders to adapt to change and make strategy that works in the real world. Senior leaders shape the future by moving toward the vision of the organization, which is built on its strengths and takes advantage of the opportunities of the world. (Contains 53 references.) (NB)

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Abstract:

Today's community colleges face an ever-changing environment. Faster and improved planning intelligence is needed and this has to be connected to decision-making. This paper presents a community college case study of a strategic planning process. The process linked the analytic inputs of research with the authority and intuition of leaders.

Overcoming the planning dilemma:

Linking analysis with decision-making at Red River College

All organizations confront the "planning dilemma" (Mintzberg, 1994). The problem is to link analytics effectively with decision-making. Often, researchers and planners feel they are pressed to provide analytic inputs on a crisis basis without sufficient time and resources to ensure accuracy. On the other hand, senior leaders feel as if they have a sense of the needs of the organization, where it should be headed and how to steer into the uncharted future. Too often, data tables, graphic presentations, planning reports take too long to produce, are too complicated to read and generally are not helpful in informing leadership's imperative to effect change, to express vision and to craft strategy. This dilemma may have its deep roots in the paradox of logic and creativity, of the relative weights of logical/rational thinking and creative/divergent/lateral/generative thinking. (Mintzberg, 1994: De Wit & Meyer, 1999). It has been suggested that planners and researchers tend to be logic / rationality dominant while leaders tend to be creative / intuitive dominant (Mintzberg, 1994).

To achieve success all organizations need effective methods to connect research and planning to leadership decision making. Perhaps strategic planning provides the link. It is sometimes seen as a flexible and adaptive approach to envisioning a future and putting strategies in place to achieve that vision (Barry, 1998). The importance of strategic planning as a tool for educational institutions to manage change has been frequently expressed (see, for example, Hall & Elliott, 1993; Krantz & Hart, 1998; Myers, 1996; Swank, 1999; and Tischler, Biberman & Alkhafaji, 1998). There are many comprehensive models for strategic planning (see, for example, Allison & Kaye, 1997;

Canadian International Development Agency, 1997; Morrison, Renfro & Boucher, 1984; Rowley, Lujan & Dolence, 1997; Tischler, Biberman & Alkhafaji, 1998).

Strategy planning has a long history in the military and has been used by organizations dating back to the 1950's. Its definition, processes and focus have evolved since that time (see Steiner, 1979; Mintzberg, 1994). Early models focused almost exclusively on SWOT analysis methods. Later, quantitative and qualitative strategy formulation models were added. Then, the importance of environmental scanning was recognized for understanding the external forces impacting an organization. This was followed by including elements of competitive advantage, strategic intent and core competencies, leading to business transformation as the key for strategic planning (see Porter, 1996; Hamel, 1996). Mintzberg (1994) defined strategic planning as a process with particular benefits in particular contexts. Viewing strategic planning primarily as a process helps to clarify what it is and what it does for an organization. There are products, the plan document, but it is mostly the transformative nature of the process, which is central. In general, newer strategic planning approaches focus on adaptability to change, creativity and the importance of strategy itself and how to facilitate organizational learning (see, for example, Lawrence, 1999; Liedtka, 1998; Mintzberg & Lampel, 1999).

However, there is no consensus on the efficacy of strategic planning to overcome the planning dilemma. Indeed some see strategic planning as counterproductive for effective strategy in our time of accelerating change.

It has been argued that planning does not help with strategy and can be detrimental to a company's success (Hamel, 1996; Hamel, 2000). As Mintzberg (1987)

argued shaping strategy is like crafting pottery. A master potter starts with a preconceived strategy but responds to changes in her ideas, in the developing clay, in her environment as the pot develops. The act of working itself increases the knowledge necessary for the next step. Overall, strategy for an organization is always in development, always changing, always moving farther into the future, based on a sense of the past and a sense of the dynamics in the world and the possibilities offered by the external and internal environment. Formal planning and research could disrupt this process. What is needed is strategic thinking, that is, a type of thinking that is creative, future-focused and experimental (Liedtka, 1998). This means being alert to opportunities and being pre-emptive in exploiting them (Hamel & Prahalad, 1994). Strategic thinking is more important than the current slate of strategies themselves. The environment changes continuously and an awareness of what is truly important is what really counts. Traditional strategic planning is too bureaucratic, too measurement driven, too incremental to ensure organizations flourish in the torrent of technological, lifestyles, economic, demographic and political change today.

This disjunction between strategic thinking and strategic planning is the planning dilemma recasted. The dichotomy is really between the analytic aspects of planning and the creative aspects of intuition (Lawrence, 1999). The challenge is still to link the two elements. No organization can thrive without analysis, it is needed to gather business intelligence to help shape strategy and to measure results. And no organization can thrive without creative and intuitive leadership.

Analysis is required because of the difficulty in accurately predicting the future as change continues to accelerate. Today, post-secondary educational institutions,

as with other organizations, face significant challenges and opportunities with accelerating changes (D'Onofrio & Jackson, 1999; Rieley, 1997). Methods are required to understand the external environment and its impact on the educational institution and to apply this to the development of strategy, that is, decision making about the future course of the institution. As we move into the 21st century, post-secondary educational institutions must be aware of and adapt to the major forces in the environment affecting the delivery of learning. There are fluctuations in public policy, the economy, in technology, in demographics, in learners and learning process, and in social dynamics. There are significant changes in the world and there is uncertainty about those changes and their impacts. This uncertainty about the external environment is a function of both the perceived complexity, that is, the number of variables and the resulting difficulty in ascertaining casual relationships, and the perceived dynamism, that is, the pace and acceleration of change. Combining this with overall strategic uncertainty leads to the need for more and more timely analysis and the integration of this deeper into an organization (Choo, 1999).

Futures research helps organizations systematically explore and develop informed perceptions, alternatives and choices about the future (Amara 1991; Gordon, 1992; Morrison, Renfro & Boucher, 1984). There are a number of techniques, both qualitative and quantitative, such as: Delphi technique, Delphi through interviewing, electronically assisted Delphi, environmental scanning, trend extrapolation, time series analysis, modeling, probabilistic techniques (trend impact analysis, cross-impact analysis), scenario planning, and chaos theory.

Environmental scanning is linked to futures studies, sometimes as an overruling concept, sometimes as the link between futures and strategic planning. Environmental scanning has a long history of application (Aguilar, 1967). It is employed in a variety of areas, for example, overall business management (Fry & Killing, 1989; Harrison & St John, 1998); marketing, (Kotler & Turner, 1998); manufacturing (Beal, 2000); colleges (Friedel & Rosenberg, 1993); CEOs analysis (Sawyer, Ebrahim & Thibodeaux, 2000) and information technology (Maier, Rainer, Jr., & Snyder, 1997).

Environmental scanning has been defined as the systematic collection of external information to lessen the randomness of information flowing into the organization and to provide early warnings for managers of changing external conditions (Aguilar, 1967). It includes competitor, competitive and business intelligence. It is a process of gathering, analyzing and disseminating knowledge about sectors of the external environment critical for the future of an organization (Choo, 1999). It is a critical external knowledge management activity for organizational future success.

There are several environmental scanning methods (Aguilar, 1967; Choo, 1999; Morrison, 1992). These include the following. (a) Undirected viewing, scanning of information sources with no specific needs in mind. Usually the scan is broad but shallow. The intent is to become sensitive to issues. (b) Conditioned viewing, directed scanning on selected topics areas and/or issues of relevance to the organization. The intent is assessing the general nature of the impact on an organization. (c) Informal search, this consists of actively looking for information to deepen knowledge. It is informal in that it is limited and unstructured. (d) Formal search, this is a proactive mode

of scanning and is structured in accordance with an established procedure or methodology. It is systematic and is focused on providing a basis for decision-making.

There are different levels of the environment a scan can be directed at (Morrison, 1992). These include the following levels. (a) Task environment: the particular set of customers of an organization. (b) Industry environment: all enterprises associated with an organization, all elements of the education sector. (c) Macro-environment: the big picture of social, technological, economic and political sectors.

As well, scanning systems can be (Morrison, 1992): (a) irregular, conducted on an ad hoc basis related to issues management; (b) periodic, conducted in relation to a planning cycle; or (c) continuous, scanning systems are used to inform the strategic planning process at all times.

The result of the intersections of these categories is a taxonomy of environmental scanning that is related to the need of each individual organization. Scanning methodologies depend in part on the judgement of the planners and researchers conducting the scan.

Of course, effective analysis requires more than isolated researchers producing environmental scan reports. Strategy depends on linking analysis and creativity. Wilson (1994) surveyed the strategic planning practices of companies and discovered that strategic planning was still widely used and viable but changed from early approaches. This was due to a shift to using less mechanistic techniques and combining quantitative data with qualitative understanding. Mintzberg's (1994) concept of strategy relies upon the joining of two sets of activities. They include; people who study and know the external forces and the internal organization well and leaders who help set new

directions emerging from collective wisdom. Working together the groups recognize opportunity patterns based on strengths and set new strategy.

By focusing attention on future events, planners and researchers can help disrupt current modes of thinking in order to create a gap between today and the future and to encourage thinking about new ways of being successful. Strategic planning and strategic thinking are dialectically related (Heracleos, 1998). Both are necessary for effective management. Strategic planners and researchers can be key change agents in post-secondary educational institutions.

The question this research attempted to address is how to link the technical skills and knowledge of research and planning professionals with the authority, intuition and flexibility of senior leaders in post-secondary educational institutions and the creativity and micro-market knowledge of academic chairs. This was investigated at a large, comprehensive Canadian community college with an open access admissions policy. Starting in 1999, a new strategic planning process was introduced, including environmental scanning and a new consultative method with senior leaders.

Methods

This paper reports a case study on a strategic planning model evolving at Red River College to address the issues of how to achieve current and timely analyses about the external forces affecting a college without straining reliability and accuracy, and how to involve senior leaders in the evolution of strategy based on those analyses. The focus is on the first year of the model with brief comments on improvements introduced in the second year.

The three key ingredients were: (1) a detailed organizational and project management plan for the process, (2) research intelligence founded on futures methods, through formalized environment scanning, and (3) engaging in discussion and analysis of the impact of trends on the College with senior leaders. These included: (a) senior executive (President, Vice-Presidents and Chief Financial Officer), (b) senior management (Division and Department Directors), (c) senior academic leaders (Deans and Chairs) and (d) the Board of Governors at the vision and mission level. The major purposes were: (a) to verify trends, (b) to understand the impact of the trends on the organization, namely, to sort out the big issues and challenges, (c) to identify strategies, and (d) to have the decision-makers directly involved in thinking about the future and discussing approaches to success in light of the knowledge of the changing external and internal environments. The Institutional Research and Planning Department facilitated these activities.

The College has a rolling five year Strategic Plan (Red River College, 2000a) and a rolling five year Operational Plan (Red River College, 2000b). The Plan is reviewed annually to ensure continuing relevancy. Commencing in 1999, the College adopted a new overall approach to its renewal process. The intent was to increase analytic inputs in balance with increased consultations. Another aspect of the strategic planning process not discussed in this paper was a review of progress in achieving the plan over the previous year (Red River College, 2000c). From the beginning the goal was to ensure that every step was linked together to ensure a continuous flow of knowledge about external forces, combined with internal knowledge to craft strategies that would help achieve the College's desired future.

An essential new element of the process was an environmental scan, focusing on the following sectors: public policy, demography, economy, technology, labor force, and education and training. The purpose was to begin to identify and predict the key trends that would have an impact on the College. The scan relied on other environmental scans (for example, Association of Colleges of Applied Arts and Technology of Ontario, 1999; Karle, 1999; KPMG, 1998; United Way of Winnipeg, 1999), existing primary research studies carried out by RRC and secondary research in key sectors. The scan was periodic and looked at all three levels of the environment. Different sectors of the scan were scanned differently. Generally, due to the short time allotted, most of the scan was an informal search, that is, it was directed and focused to increase learning but was not comprehensive. Some aspects were more detailed, for example, public policy was a formal search. There was a recently elected new government in Manitoba, thus a content analysis of election material was conducted to assess the impact on post-secondary education. Demography employed existing governmental data sets and projections. Economic matters were assessed using secondary sources, such as national bank forecasts, Economic Development Winnipeg forecasts and Statistics Canada data. All of the sectors were supplemented with scans of selected local, national and international media.

The second stage was a formalized method to involve senior leaders to capture their knowledge about trends and their ideas about strategy. These included:

(1) The Board of Governors. The process included: (a) an environmental scan presentation leading to a discussion of trends and challenges and renewal of the overall

vision, and (b) a presentation on the draft plan leading to discussion and approval of a final revised plan.

(2) The College Senior Management Committee. The process of involvement was extensive, including: (a) a discussion and approval of the structured four month plan for the renewal of the strategic plan, (b) a scan presentation followed by a consultation on trends and the future for RRC, (c) a detailed vulnerabilities and capabilities consultation, (d) a consultation on initiatives and priorities, and (e) a review, modification and approval of the final plan.

(3) College Council (the council provides advice and recommendations to the College Management Committee on College issues and consists of staff and student representatives). The consultation was focused around a scan presentation followed by a verification consultation.

(4) Deans and Chairs Committee. The consultation was focused around a scan presentation followed by a verification discussion.

(5) College staff (self-selected). Staff had the opportunity to attend a scan presentation forum and contribute ideas at a RRC Conference.

At these sessions a qualitative technique was used to capture ideas. Survey booklets with open-ended questions were developed, distributed to participants, collected, and used for analysis. These booklets came in two forms: a) to capture futures thinking and to verify trend information and b) to capture knowledge about strategies to achieve vision and mission in relation to identified strengths and weaknesses and external opportunities and threats. The booklets were short, consisting of four half-pages with three pages containing no more than five questions in

totoal. Booklets were produced in different colors to identity the different consultation groups.

Results from each of the strategic planning stages were communicated back to groups to confirm the results of the analysis. All of the steps were documented, sometimes with multiple drafts, for example, (a) Red River College Scan, 1999, (b) Red River College SWOT Analysis 1999, (c) Red River College Initiatives and Strategies 1999, (d) Red River College Planning and Budget Priorities 1999, and (e) Red River College Strategic Plan 2000-2005.

The intent of the changes in the strategic planning process in 1999 at RRC was to add additional analytic inputs and to ensure senior leaders were directly connected with the scanning process. It was hypothesized that this would lead to more strategic thinking at different levels in the College and in the long-term greater success in linking the College's plan to the real world.

Results

The Revised Strategic Plan

The final product was the revised strategic plan. There were substantial alterations in the plan itself, including, a new vision attribute, a new goal and revisions to the existing goals, a new objective, and numerous revisions to and new strategies and actions. All of this was approved by the Board of Governors.

In addition, the strategic planning process identified budget priorities and the College budget was developed with these as the guiding parameters. All budget choices were then strategic choices and the annual budget was the financial plan to accomplish the strategic plan. In addition, as part of the annual budget development process,

leaders were required to articulate trends for their particular area. This encouraged thinking about trends and their impacts and allowed for the identified trends to become part of the next cycle of revising the corporate Strategic Plan.

Feedback from Participants

Qualitative feed back from participants suggested high levels of satisfaction and involvement with the process. Comments included: the process was not time consuming for leaders and allowed for easy participation; the environmental scan research was instrumental in initiating discussion; the process was clearly organized and structured; the process required no prior experiences, so there was no prep time; it is analogous to a DACUM process and hence was somewhat familiar; the process was self-contained and there was little or no "homework" for participants; there was a sense of genuine involvement and process building; and as a group exercise, it contributed to team capacity building and corporate vision buy-in.

Strategic Thinking from Strategic Planning

The true long term measure of success will be in the development of strategic thinking at all levels of the College, for one of the key objectives articulated in the plan is to integrate strategic thinking throughout the organization.

There were a number of subsequent divisional and departmental strategic planning initiatives. Some were independent from and some were led by the Institutional Research and Planning Department. The independent planning efforts included environmental scanning and trend analysis and used the corporate plan as the base. In 2000, for example, the Industrial Technologies Division conducted an independent process and the Civil / CAD Technology Department of that Division also completed a

plan. During the winter / spring of 2000, the Institutional Research and Planning Department was able to respond to two requests to lead divisional level strategic planning projects. These plans were undertaken within the purview and context of the corporate level strategic plan. The scanning techniques were similar but there were some adjustments. The environmental scan for the Student Services Division was very similar but was deepened to look more closely at the issue of competition and at the matter of the changing composition and characteristics of the student population. In addition, primary data on College student attitudes were collected to provide direction on strategies. The consultation techniques involved virtually all staff members of the Student Services division through a series of facilitated sessions using a similar, expanded, booklet approach outlined earlier in this paper. For Distance Education, the selected scan sectors were: technology, globalization, demography, knowledge economy, and customer relations. More primary data were collected using a variety of survey populations (in the task environment) and a modified Delphi interview technique of provincial and national experts in Distance Education (industry environment). The environmental scan accessed a number of secondary sources and scanned selected local, national and international media. The results of both of these irregular scans were integrated into the periodic scan for the renewal of the corporate strategic plan for 2001-2006. This interest and activity in strategy development from various departments suggested that the corporate strategic planning process was a success.

Impact on Faculty Chairs

At Red River College, the front line academic leaders are the Chairs of programs. They lead academic planning within their program area and contribute to overall

academic planning with the Deans and the Vice President, Academic. This planning is in response to demands from students, business and industry, accreditation and professional bodies, advisory committees, reviewers, and funders. The Chairs function as key external points of contact and are a key creative force for academic program renewal and improvement. The overall planning approach used at Red River College engaged the Chairs directly. This helped in the articulation of the key external forces and in the understanding of the impact of such forces on the College within specific program areas and corporately. Anecdotally, it seemed that this engagement was very important for success.

Discussion

The method implemented at Red River College in 1999 is akin to "soft analysis" discussed by Mintzberg (1994) as a way of overcoming the planning dilemma and linking analysis to decision making to achieve strategic action. Analysis must be presented in a timely way and in "sound bite" fashion. The critical aspect is to pose the right questions and to have continual dialogue within an organization between planners/researchers and leaders. The method is still evolving and adapting through applications at the divisional level and through the development of more sophisticated and timely analytic and consultative inputs.

The approach seems to have particular application within a post-secondary milieu where success depends on collegial debate, experimentation, and emerging notions based on data (Frost, 1998). The role of institutional research and planning is to bring knowledge to bear on the future of the institution. Bringing knowledge about the future to various constituencies within a post-secondary institution will help in the

expression of new ideas, the articulation of conflicting views, and the integration of many points of view to allow for non-linear thinking to expand (Frost, 1998). It is a key function of institutional research and planning to encourage and foster anticipatory management through an effective strategic planning process (Ashley & Morrison, 1996; Boon, 1997). Such a process attempts to overcome the analytic / intuitive dichotomy. The development of new knowledge is based on hypothesis testing. The process at RRC is based on this notion that is embedded in the tradition of research and the tradition of post-secondary educational institutions.

The process does have limitations. These include: the environmental scan taxonomy was too narrow and too shallow, the consultative process was not deep enough in the organization and the analysis of internal resources and performance was overly qualitative. In addition, the measurement of the impact on participants and the College was conducted informally.

For subsequent renewals, the intent is to strengthen the strategic planning method on two fronts: (a) to deepen and broaden the scanning process and to augment qualitative and quantitative forecasting techniques, and (b) to deepen and broaden the links with managers, faculty and staff in the College and to include other futures techniques such as scenario planning (Rieley 1997; Robbins, 1995; Shoemaker, 1995; Schwartz, 1991). Although there was success at RRC in engaging senior leaders, the consultations during 1999 with faculty and staff were not extensive. This was improved in 2000 through a series of open forum and web-based consultations. However, the focus remained on being as quick as possible in translating data and knowledge into strategies.

Conclusions and Implications

The key factors for success at Red River College were (a) the process was highly structured and organized with a communicated and approved, detailed project management plan including objectives, activities, identified participants, and milestones over four months; (b) there was confidence in the research results articulated in the environmental scan, (c) the process recognized the essential collegial nature of a post-secondary educational institution and engaged administrative and academic leaders, and (d) the process was completed on time and in a relatively brief period of time. The first three of these factors have been identified as important for strategic planning success in a post-secondary educational institution (Swank, 1999). Another factor affecting success is that although there is a collegial culture at Red River College, there is also a culture closely connected with local business and industry. A number of College administrative staff and faculty are familiar with business models of planning and strategy crafting.

The fundamental role of institutional research and planning in post-secondary education is to provide the analytic and planning inputs to facilitate decision-making (Frost, 1993: McLaughin, Howard & McLaughin, 1998). It is necessary to gather, organize and distribute knowledge about the key social, economic, technological and political variables having an impact on post-secondary institutions. This also has to be done accurately and in a timely fashion. Institutional research and planning provides the methods, and the basis of the external and internal knowledge, as well as the internal consultative processes required to help post-secondary institutions improve on current performance to achieve a better future.

Successful management of post-secondary institutions is the ability of senior leaders to adapt to change and make strategy that works in the real world. Senior leaders shape the future by moving closer towards the vision of the organization which is built on its strengths and takes advantage of the opportunities in the world. A process that is time sensitive, involves people and allows for the discussion and elaboration of alternate strategies can inform their intuitive grasp of organizational imperatives. It is their responsibility to ensure the long-term success of their post-secondary educational institutions and a process that integrates new knowledge with participation and experiment will help in their mission. Senge (1990) views leaders as stewards of the collective energy of an organization and the designers of collective insight. They build generative learning, which requires new ways to see the world and its possibilities.

The process deployed at Red River College was designed to bring these two groups together to discuss and think about the future based on research. The ultimate outcome for the College is to cascade strategic thinking throughout the organization, to cascade the notion of organizational hypothesis testing to position the institution to succeed in the future. It means a proactive strategic approach towards designing the future of the College. A future based on knowledge of the major trends affecting the College and built on a foundation of internal consultation, debate and collaboration to integrate the intellectual capital of the College staff into the plan. The process of involvement in the strategic planning is as important, perhaps more important, as the final product. A key element is the characterization of strategic thinking as hypothesis driven. Institutional research is driven by scientific methods, the method is hypotheses testing not blind fact gathering, and in fact all environmental scanning is a method of

hypothesis testing. The hypotheses are embedded in the judgement made by planners as to the categories, depth and sources of the environmental scan. This must resonate with senior leaders, and involving them directly in any planning process is fundamental for success.

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